Historical Society of Palm Desert

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The Hourglass

Community
Service
Collections
Archives

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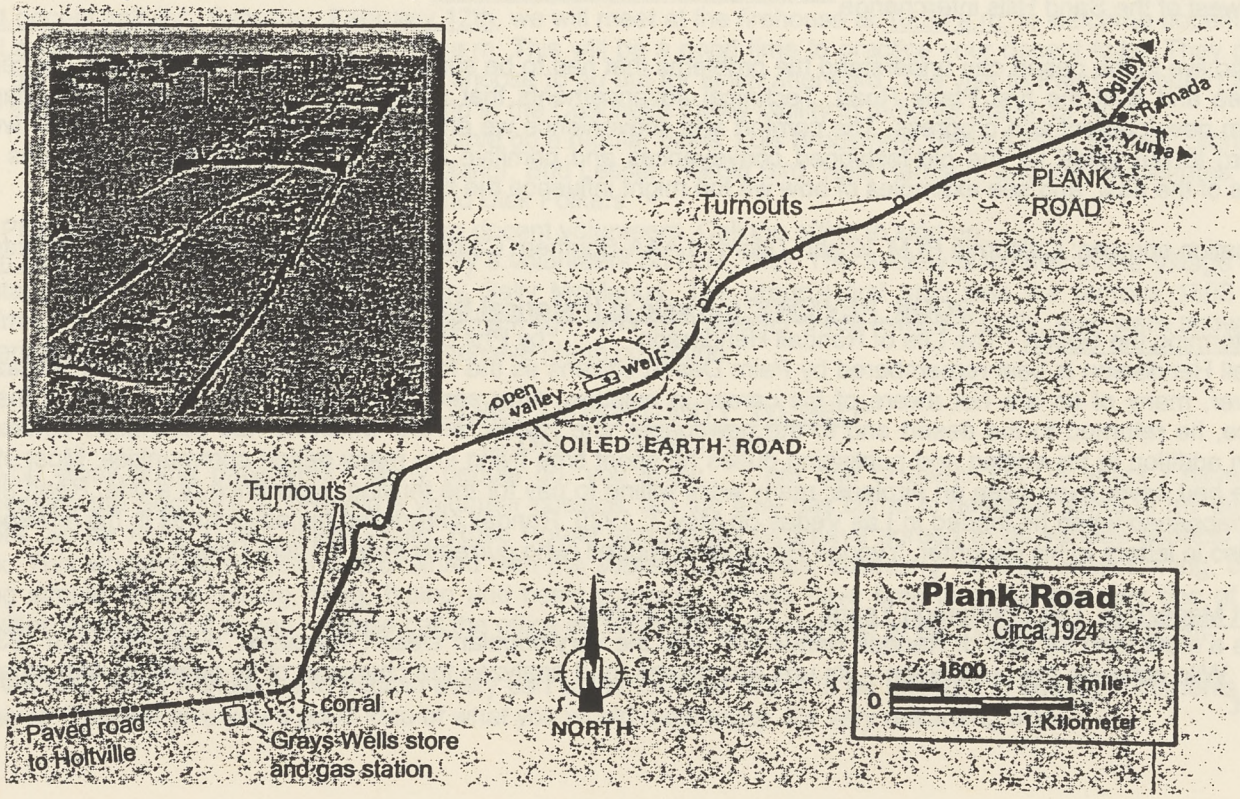
THE DESERT PLANK ROAD

Compiled from HSPD archives
By V. Folkers - Curator

According to one of our sources, the very first road used to cross the Southern California desert terrain was actually made from bundled weeds. The year was 1912 and this application lasted barely a year due to heavy use. That same year promotion for a plank road began as two rival cities, San Diego and Los Angeles, realized that automobile transportation would be crucial to their future financial well-being. It took Ed Fletcher, a road builder, 19-1/2 hours to travel from San Diego to Phoenix by way of the treacherous Algodones Dunes or Imperial Sand Dunes. He had to use a team of six horses to pull his auto through the sand, but the feat demonstrated the feasibility of the direct east/west route. A bridge across the Colorado River at Yuma, and the upcoming opening of the Panama Canal in 1915 were incentives to get ready for an influx of automobile traffic.

Money was raised to finance the construction, and 13000 planks were shipped from San Diego to Holtville, California. Gray's Well was used as a work camp on the western edge of the Sand Hills. Starting on February 14, 1915, both volunteers and paid workers labored. Two parallel 25" plank tracks were spiked to cross pieces underneath. It floated across 6-1/2 miles of shifting sand, and work ended on April 4, 1915. A week later 25 cars with 100 riders called the "Glad Hand Excursion" traveled the new road and declared it a success. Maintenance turned out to be a major problem. Besides heavy use by tourists and farmers, mule drawn scrapers were used to clear the drifting sand off the road. The planks became more and more splintered.



The California State Highway Commission took responsibility for the road in June of 1915. They designed and built a completely new Plank Road in 1916. It differed from the original road in that it had one track 8 feet wide, and double-width turnouts every 1000 feet for passing. The structure was prefabricated in 12-foot sections at a plant in Ogilby, California. Sections were brought to the site by wagons and lowered onto the leveled sand bed with a crane.

Because upkeep was necessary, from 1916 till 1926 a crew of men worked constantly to remove drifts from the road. The whipping wind moved sand over the track making it impassable one-third of the time. So many cars were pulled into the turnouts that traffic jams were common and motorists' patience wore thin. Sometimes the more aggressive drivers took matters into their own hands in order to keep traffic moving by temporarily lifting cars off the roadway. It was not a comfortable way to travel; early users described it as a very "bumpy" ride.

In 1925 a man traveling the road after a sandstorm stopped to pick up a hat lying on the sand, so the legend goes. He was surprised to see a head under the hat, and offered to dig the man out. The buried man responded, "Better go back to town and hire a tractor. I'm still at the wheel of my Model T."

While the Plank Road was a necessary trade route for Imperial Valley farmers; it was also a form of recreation during the cooler winter months. Groups planned picnics and camp-outs at Newt Gray's Well. He even built a store where he sold cold drinks and a few provisions.

When it became obvious that a new solution had to be found to by-pass the maintenance and traffic flow problems, everybody and their brother had advice for the Highway Commission. Could they build an elevated road over the sand? How about digging under the sand and forming a tunnel? For two years, from 1923 to 1925, engineers studied the movement of sand dunes along the route and tested various surfaces. They found that low dunes moved much faster than the higher ones. Finally they decided that a combination of concrete and asphalt laid on a built-up sand bank would work out. Opened on August 12, 1926 the new paved road was 20 feet wide, allowing traffic in both directions. Upkeep was cut to a fraction of what had been necessary for the wooden road.

Preservation of the old Plank Road has been frustrated by nature, by mankind, and by the passing years. Many of the sections have been claimed by various museums around the country for exhibit. The ruins are recognized as a California Historical Landmark. Thanks to the Bureau of Land Management, parts of the Plank Road that still remain are being protected. A 1500 foot section of the ruins of this historic treasure can be seen at the west end of Gray's Well Road, which is a frontage road south of Interstate 8. Also a monument and display can be viewed three miles west of the Sand Hills interchange.

We who live in the desert can understand the problems that had to be surmounted by the pioneers who conceived the idea and built the first Plank Road. Technical advancements that were used in later versions were part of modern development and progress. The comfort and convenience we enjoy in the transportation field today would be hard to put aside for the old-fashioned conveyances and primitive roads. Still, we can enjoy memories and reports of the past, and see examples of how we too might influence the history we are now living.

Information sources: California BLM, Kristin Tilford of AAA-Southern California, Towe Auto Museum-Sacramento.

BOOK REVIEWS (on sale at Historical Society headquarters)

Barnstorming the Desert - The Life of Randall Henderson by Phil Brigandi

Randall Henderson is best remembered by Palm Desert citizens as the founder and publisher of Desert Magazine; however, many of us are not aware of his career in aviation. After serving in World War I as a pilot in the Air Service, he returned to the desert and to the newspaper, the *Blythe Herald,* which he had purchased before the war. In addition to his editing and publishing duties he spent time flying into many desert communities. Most of the people had never even seen an airplane; many were willing to pay for the thrilling experience of a ride. Read about what happened when he landed in Las Vegas on May 7, 1920. Randall chronicled his adventures in his newspaper and also in letters to his daughter, Yvonne Henderson Riddell (who currently lives in Palm Desert.)

Desert Magazine: The Henderson Years by Peter Wild

This is a must read for fans of Randall Henderson, and the very popular "Desert Magazine" published from 1937 to 1993. Wild critiques the publication -- its ups and downs, and analyzes the character of its publisher with amazing insight.

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MEMBERS WHO LIVE IN OUR MEMORY

Willa Ruth McKell

Willa Ruth and her husband Martin have lived in Palm Desert since 1965 and have been very active members of the community. They are charter members of the Historical Society. She traveled the world as a director and leader of high school students in the People to People program. Willa Ruth was a vibrant lady who will be sorely missed.

Mrs. Randolph Scott Jack Boehm

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NEW MEMBERS

Contributing	Business	Family	Individual
John & Beverly Fleitz	Southwest Aquatics, Inc.	Jerry & Paula Abels	Rose Del Rio
Chris & Sandi Van Vliet	(Dr. Paul Beaty)	Harvey & Terre Hasson	Linda Kabealo
		Paul Ames & Johna Davis	John Merstik
			Victoria Bailey

Did you get a friend or relative to sign up for membership in 2004?
That would make a great New Years resolution for 2005 !!!

DONATIONS

Jan King - 25 items for the archives .....Jan worked with Bob Hope for many years. She was his right hand, so to speak. Her donation created a Pioneer file in her name as well as filling in voids in many categories (Thanks to Jean Hollenbeck for her role in getting this valuable collection to us.)

Barbara Jean Callahan - A large collection of Washington School photos and newspaper articles from the 1940s to the present. Bj is probably the only person in the valley who could have given us the information we required for the timeline the Society provided for the school's demolition party. Thanks so much, Bj, for your patience throughout all the necessary revisions.

VOLUNTEER / DOCENT NEWS

By Jean Ernst, Committee Chair

Next docent activity: Saturday, February 12th, we will meet at the firehouse at 10:30 a.m. to welcome docents from the La Quinta Historical Society at 11:00 a.m. This will be a good time to practice your docent talks. They plan to stay only for an hour, so some of us may choose to go out for lunch afterward. The visit to Palm Springs H.S. was very successful. I will try to set up a field trip to the Coachella Valley facility in Indio for March or April.

Thanks to the loyal docents who serve on a regular basis: Lois Bradstreet, Rose & Brett Romer, Gloria Petito, Laura McCandless, Lynn Manor, Bud Lesser, Harold Bird, Helli Harrison; and also substitutes: Jean Hollenbeck, Adele Ruxtan and Dick Folkers

**** Please note: We could use a few more docent volunteers. Call the office to sign up.

Palm Springs H.S. field trip was attended by 8 volunteers on Nov. 19th. The Society is located in the Village Green Heritage Center. The visit was hosted by Sally McManus. The group's first stop was the famous 1893 Nellie Coffman house. In the Society museum the high light was the William Powell exhibit. Finally, they were shown how the archival system works, including an extensive photo collection.

ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY TO HELP

By Ginny Folkers, Curator

Do you enjoy doing paperwork? Many people do, you know.....I am one of them. For 14 years I have been processing the Society's archives in a volunteer position, but the time has come to delegate some of my duties to others. So far Anne Tuttle, Joyce White, Rose Romer and Harold Bird have agreed to do various aspects of this work. This would involve getting acquainted with the subject categories, collecting, sorting, accessioning, cutting, doing simple layouts, gluing, filing, typing and basic computer. If you have time to spare and any one of these activities sounds good to you - please call the office at 346-6588 and ask Anne to put your name on the list.

We will hold small workshops to explain every part of the process that is to be followed in adding documents to the archives. This will give you a good idea of what you would most enjoy. It's very rewarding work.

Palm Desert School / George Washington Elementary School / Washington Charter School

Compiled by Bj Callahan & V. Folkers

It all began on September 14, 1949 -- the opening day of Palm Desert School on Portola Avenue. That was one of many "firsts" to be celebrated by the fledgling community. The school was the first satellite of the Indio School District. By '63 they had a May festival, a book fair, and the name was changed to George Washington Elementary School with 494 students. The summer of '64 Ewing Robertson, principal for 10 years, launched a study to form a separate school district. Because of overcrowding the school added portable classrooms and tried to buy adjoining property to enlarge the playground. In May of '80 a double drinking fountain was dedicated to Andy the Donkey Man. On Nov. 22 in '82 a plaque was installed commemorating the 1946 gift of the school site by Cliff Henderson. The controversial sculpture fence was installed, and the first annual Mini-Muster fire safety program took place in '93. The name changed to Washington Charter School on April 19,1994 when Desert Sands gave approval. Over the years the school has won many awards, in 2000 their 50th anniversary was celebrated, ...and now another landmark ceremony was to take place.

WASHINGTON CHARTER DEMOLITION PARTY

"Thanks for the Memories"

December 4, 2004

Society President Hal Rover with the dapper John Marman as President George Washington.

Months of planning went into preparation for the demolition party. One person who did the major portion of the organization was Paula Abels, vice president of the Parents' Club Foundation. She worked with Society members to incorporate historical documents and photos that we have preserved. Bj Callahan, who retired in 1988 after 30-plus years of teaching was our main contributor of historical information. She just happened to have her own private Washington School archives at home, so she was indispensable in putting together a time line.

After 55 years of operation in Palm Desert, Washington School more than qualifies as an historical site. Because it has been such an integral part of the community and of the families that lived here over those years, a few tears will be shed to see the campus buildings disappear. If you attended the party on Dec. 4th, you no doubt felt that warm and welcoming atmosphere that identifies the people involved with the school.

We will gladly admit to being partial in saying that Bj Callahan was the star of the show. As we viewed the exhibits, saw the video, drank hot chocolate, ate the barbeque lunch, visited with student alumni and staff members -- "Mrs. Callahan" was most often the topic of conversation.

The Callahan Family: Tim, Kyle, Bj and Dan

"Thanks for the Memories" documentary is available on DVD for $15.00 each. Call Paula Abels at 773-0150 to order yours. The Society will receive a portion of the proceeds.

YARD SALE

The Board of Directors wishes to thank Don Graybill, who chaired this two-day fundraiser held on Oct. 30-31. Don worked at cleaning up the back yard, pruning and sweeping two weeks before the sale. Setting up tables, displaying, covering everything each night, and masterful direction during the sale were tasks he took on as a chairman's duties. He was also the self-appointed chief photographer. Thanks a million, Don, you did a great job!

Although the merchandise collected was not quite up to last year's quality and rain put us two days behind, we still made $4526. Gary Olesen's purchase of a 36" Sony television set after the sale brought us close to our 2003 sale proceeds. We purchased a pricing gun this year which saved time in that phase of the work, but we will need more help with future yard sales -- before, during, and after.

At the board meeting on Nov. 10 it was suggested that we might want to consider other options than a yard sale to raise money. One way mentioned was to have a Christmas boutique and bake sale on the weekend after Thanks-giving. Another was to start a gift shop in which we could sell the more valuable collectibles we have amassed, which are too expensive for the average yard sale shopper.

What do you think? We would like your input.
Drop us a note so we can discuss your ideas at the next fund-raiser meeting.
Better yet, would you like to join this committee? Call and let us know.

FALL LUNCHEON - October 20

It was raining as 80 attendees entered the Shadow Mountain Club for this annual event. Chairperson Jean Hollenbeck was giving last-minute directions for what turned out to be a very pleasant meeting with good food and excellent service. The room looked beautiful with gorgeous potted mums, thanks to the ingenuity of Kay Young. Prominent local developer, Ted Lennon, gave his perspective on both the past and the present -- with a few wise words for the future. President Rover thanked Bob Green for lending us his sound system. Several members said that they liked Shadow Mountain for Society luncheons.

GOLF CART PARADE

This colorful event took place along El Paseo as usual on November 7. Mr. & Mrs. Santa, assistants, and elves were characterized by the Folkers family. President Rover packed the cab with his family and brought up the rear of the parade despite the fact that Engine #1 was not in tip-top shape.....maintenance was forthcoming. During 2005 there will be no parade; but it has been rescheduled to January 8, 2006.

FOUNDER'S DAY

Joyce White, a member of the Core Committee (a community group) to make plans for Founder's Day reported that they are getting an early start this year. There will be the usual award recipient and at least three people who will receive Palm Awards. May 15th falls on a Sunday, the location will be the City Council chambers, the time will be 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. Please mark your calendars.

DISPLAYS AND EXHIBITS

A new display has been added to the "Firefighting: Tools of the Trade" exhibit in the center section of the fire house. It consists of model firefighting vehicles placed on a series of ramps. Bob Green and Archie Sharp have devised this new display for your enjoyment. Be sure to visit Society headquarters during museum hours to see this new addition. Archie Sharp was recommended to us by the La Quinta Historical Society for assistance in display set-up. His background is in set design for Hollywood studios and he will be working with us occasionally.

WEB SITE

Fred Daniel, who designed our membership brochure and stationery, will be working on setting up a web site for the Society. Hal Rover and Brett Romer will be collaborating in determining what kinds of information and photos we want to use in this project.

NEW BOARD MEMBER

At the November 10th Board of Directors meeting, Bev Bergh was introduced as a new board member. The other board members each talked briefly about themselves as a form of self-introduction. Welcome, Bev, we are looking forward to working with you.

MINI - MUSTER

John and Madonna Marman did a first-class job of taking over the reigns for this program from Dan and Bj Callahan. Even though everything went smoothly at all four of the local schools, John still called a meeting on December 1st to get input from volunteers about what we can do next year to make it even better. This is the Society's major community outreach. Next October, which is Fire Safety month each year, would you like to help with this event?

"Senior Class: A Revue of the Golden Years"

The Palme d'Or Theatre at Westfield Shoppingtown will present this production with Anna Marie Alberghetti, Ruta Lee, Julius LaRosa and other stars from Jan. 2005 thru May 29, 2005. Tickets are available at $37.50 for groups of 15 or more. If you are interested in attending, please contact the office - 346-6588.

FROM THE PEN OF RANDALL HENDERSON

"To those who come to the Desert with friendliness, it gives friendship; to those who come with courage, it gives new strength of character. Those seeking relaxation find release from the world of man-made troubles. For those seeking beauty, the Desert offers nature's rarest artistry. This is the Desert that men and women learn to love."

Desert Magazine (Nov. 1937)

BURMA SHAVE SIGNS

Golfers !	Makes shaving	Political pull	***Today is the tomorrow***
If fewer strokes	A grin game	May be of use	***you worried about***
Are what you crave	Not a skin game	For razor pull	***yesterday.....***
You're out of the rough	Burma Shave	There's no excuse	***was it worth it ?***
With Burma-Shave		Burma Shave	

The Verse by the Side of the Road by Frank Rowsome, Jr.

Editor: Ginny Folkers

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